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SUBJECT: LESOTHO: ALLEGED COUP PLOTTERS FREE IN SOUTH AFRICA

REF: A) MASERU 488; B) MASERU 452; C) MASERU 439; and D) MASERU 398

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On August 14, three of the six Lesotho nationals accused of coup plotting in Lesotho, and reportedly granted political asylum in South Africa, walked free from a magistrate court in Gauteng Province after posting bail. Crowds of their supporters, bused in from Maseru, packed the courtroom. On August 15, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) named six additional Basotho individuals, including the former commander of the defunct Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), as wanted in connection with June 2007 attacks on GOL ministerial residences. The presence of figures such as All Basotho Convention (ABC) Leader Thomas Thabane at the Gauteng Province trial indicates that the fate of those accused of "coup plotting" and living in self-imposed exile in South Africa will continue to be a hot political topic in the Mountain Kingdom and may have interesting implications for the South Africa-Lesotho bilateral relationship. END SUMMARY.

South Africa Releases Three Accused

By Lesotho of "Coup Plotting" on Bail

12. (U) According to local political and media sources, on August 14 three of the six Basotho men accused of "coup plotting" in Lesotho who sought political asylum in South Africa (ref B) appeared before the Sebokeng Magistrate Court in Gauteng Province, South Africa. South African police apparently arrested Khotso Lebakeng, Phakiso Semoli, and Elias Motlomelo subsequent to an arrest and extradition request from the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) which cited them and three others for charges including armed robbery, attempted murder, and unlawful possession of rifles. The South African court granted the men bail and warned them not to leave the country. Each of the three posted bail of 4,750 rand (approximately \$680) and are expected to reappear in court on September 18. The magistrate stated that the court required this time to review documents relating to Lesotho's extradition request and the men's political asylum applications. The whereabouts of the other three accused "coup plotters" who fled to South Africa -- Makotoko Lerotholi, Mokherane Tsatsanyane, and Thabo Thants'i -- are unknown.

¶3. (U) The families of Lebakeng, Semoli, and Motlomelo chartered several buses to transport supporters of the three men from Maseru to South Africa for the August 14 court appearance. According to Embassy contacts, these supporters filled the court to capacity, and included Thomas Thabane, the principal leader of Lesotho's political opposition; and Attorney Hae Phoofolo, a well-known Mosotho human rights lawyer. Part of the proceedings was carried live by Lesotho's politically-oriented religious radio station Harvest FM.

More Arrest Warrants, More LLA Connections

¶4. (U) On August 15, the LMPS issued a press release naming an additional six men wanted in connection with the June 2007 attacks on GOL ministerial residences (ref D). The statement listed the following men as wanted by the LMPS: Lits'itso Sekamane (former Member of Parliament and former Commander of the defunct Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA, ref A)); Thabiso Mahase (former LLA member and estranged husband of High Court Judge Mahase - ref C); Shadrack Chakela (traditional musician); Lefa Ramantsoe; Tlala Lets'olo; and a South African citizen by the name of "Alex" (no further information available). The LMPS appealed to the public to provide information concerning the whereabouts of the six men.

Shifting Charges Engender Skepticism

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¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: The fact that Lebakeng, Semoli, and Motlomelo are under extradition threat for charges that were never leveled against them in Lesotho (where they are charged solely with high treason) has engendered skepticism in Lesotho's opposition circles. Two names on the LMPS's new list of individuals wanted in connection with the June 2007 attacks on ministerial residences are well known former LLA members, a pattern of association with the former insurgent group noted in previous reporting (ref A). The presence of figures such as All Basotho Convention (ABC) Leader Thomas Thabane in Gauteng Province for the trial of Lebakeng, Semoli, and Motlomelo indicates that the fate of those accused of "coup plotting" and living in self-imposed exile in South Africa will continue to be a hot political topic in the Mountain Kingdom and may have interesting implications for the South Africa-Lesotho bilateral relationship. END COMMENT.
MURPHY